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ABSTRACT

Surveys were conducted in 1969 to evaluate the usefulness of the metropolitan Toronto Continuing Education Directory, a 424 page work giving course titles, organizations, locations, days and hours, duration, starting dates, prerequisites, qualifications awarded, and other pertinent data. Over 200 copies went free to public libraries, university extension divisions, and community colleges; others were purchased by various users, especially in industrial personnel and counseling. Questionnaire returns of 80%, and personal interviews with professionals, indicated great interest in the Directory. A Metropolitan Information Centre of Continuing Education, with a computer-based file management system, has been established in the Central Library building; it will function as a fact-finding, information sharing, training and demonstration facility for students, and as an aid to course sponsors and professionals. It will produce a revised Directory, test and evaluate other effective means of providing information, and develop packaging and communication methods designed to reach the functionally illiterate, disadvantaged, or other public not now involved in adult education. (LY)

INSTANT INFORMATION ON CONTINUING EDUCATION IN METRO

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ON
CONTINUING EDUCATION
IN METRO

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INSTANT INFORMATION ON CONTINUING EDUCATION IN METRO

Since the introduction last fall of an easy-reference, computer-produced Continuing Education Directory, as simple to use as the telephone Yellow Pages, a staff under the sponsorship of the Metropolitan Toronto Library Board, the Ontario Association for Continuing Education and The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education has been active in developing an Information Centre which will make available even better and continuously up-to-date information on adult education. This Centre, utilizing the speed and efficiency of data processing and computers, can provide quick and reliable data to meet the needs of the citizen who seeks help on which courses to take, as well as meeting the more comprehensive requirements of the educator or institution. The Directory, already widely accepted as a much needed and usable information tool, is also being revised and improved after much study and user evaluation.

Publication of Directory First Step Toward Metro Information Centre

The "Continuing Education Directory, 1969" was released in September of last year, and presented for the first time a one-source guide to evening and part-time courses available to adults throughout the Metro Toronto area. Arranged by subject under 334 headings and cross references, 5,397 courses given by 59 organizations at over 350 locations were listed in all.

Information displayed in this 424-page publication gave under each entry: course title, organization responsible, location of course, days of the week, hours, sessions held, starting date, duration, and fees if required. Also noted where necessary were prerequisites, qualifications awarded, variations in fees, and other pertinent data.

The Directory also included an explanatory note about study for degree courses and information about Manpower programs. Participating organizations were listed with addresses, telephone numbers, and registration dates, plus a similar listing for other locations used. As an additional aid to the prospective learner, a select list of counselling services was provided.

Only those courses were included which were non-profit, were open to the general public, and contained both continuity and some element of structured learning. On this basis, those courses given by a university towards a degree, or by correspondence, or by a trade, professional or other occupational school (mostly commercial) were not included.

Directory Widely Distributed

Of the approximately 450 copies distributed by the end of 1969, some 200 were supplied free - to all Metro public libraries, the extension units of the universities, community colleges, the Y's, boards of education offices, and 12 community counselling services, as well as complimentary and press

review copies. The remainder, or more than 250 copies, were purchased by various interested users, especially in the industrial personnel and counselling fields. Almost all of the organizations initially receiving free copies subsequently made further quantity purchases. Significant outside interest was indicated by over 40 sales made to organizations not within the Metro Toronto area. A kit of brochures was supplied with the Directories. Radio and newspaper advertising about the Directory was issued in September. Some public-oriented organizations made effective use of signs and posters along with a display of the Directory.

Usefulness of Directory Established by Surveys

Of equal importance to the actual production and distribution of the Directory has been the intensive evaluation research which has been conducted since its introduction. While basic assumptions in regard to form and content, as well as intended use, were necessary in order to produce the Directory, an intensive survey was required so that any revisions, corrections or additions to improve its accuracy and usability could be incorporated in its next issue.

As the Directory was designed to meet the needs of several types of user - primarily the organizations sponsoring courses, the general public, and the professional - a variety of evaluation procedures was adopted. In general, the response to all methods of enquiry was both encouraging and informative.

Course Sponsors Helpful and Enthusiastic

The first area of enquiry, which in fact was launched prior to the release of the Directory, was among the sponsors of courses, that is, those organizations which provided the course information upon which the Directory was built. Much helpful comment and encouragement was received from these sources. After the September release a more formal questionnaire was sent out to them concerning many aspects of the format of the Directory, its accuracy, and its usability.

This questionnaire yielded a very positive response - a high return of 80% indicated a genuine interest in the usefulness of the Directory, and emphasized the need to supply complete and accurate information on a continuing basis. The extent of error noted was low, although it was recognized that some information, especially because of timing and unrecorded course changes, must become obsolete relatively quickly. Content and format came in for little criticism. A variety of suggestions were received, mainly for supplementary information, either as part of or in addition to the Directory. While this positive reaction was appreciated, the questionnaire, as it was intended, did elicit some areas of difficulty and needed improvement: these and other constructive criticisms are now being evaluated for improvement of subsequent products.

Valuable Counselling Tool for Professionals

In addition to the spontaneous response from counsellors, information officers, educators, researchers, and librarians, it was felt that a personal

interview approach to these professionals would yield a higher quality of information. This method, applied to some 33 organizations, gave more opportunity to follow up specific comments and suggestions of particular value. As many as four individuals from each organization participated in these interviews, which in many cases, were of 2 to 2 1/2 hours duration.

This face-to-face method of survey was beneficial to the professionals in that any Directory application problems were discussed during the survey and in most cases resolved. Again, an enthusiastic appreciation of the Directory was expressed together with strong indications of its performance as a useful function in their work.

Public Response Favourable

It was considered essential to obtain feed-back from the general public - citizens looking for course information for themselves - since the Directory to a large extent was designed to meet their needs. For this survey, a quantity of postage-paid reply cards designed to indicate comparative information and the user's reactions and problems was placed with the Directory in a number of public locations.

Although the return was understandably low, the trend of the sampling showed few serious problems in the use of the Directory, and that it had been helpful in selecting courses and obtaining needed information.

Evaluation of Surveys Shows Further Needs

The assumption that a directory-like presentation of adult education courses in Metro would have a great positive value to all potential users has received an overwhelming support and approval, documented by the surveys carried out after the publication of the Continuing Education Directory. At the same time, there was revealed an awareness of the very real potential of an information exchange, utilizing systematic data storage and retrieval, for the improvement of all phases of adult education course planning, selection and analysis.

Among the many key findings was that the Directory fulfills an essential part of the information dissemination process and that an up-dated revision is required for 1970. A need for education in the use of such information tools was expressed by many professionals. Further improvement and extension of information dissemination and presentation was requested by both course sponsors and professional users.

While the surveys were conducted in order to evaluate the usefulness of the Directory and to determine what changes would meet the users' requirements, it became evident by the response that a much broader and comprehensive information communication system is necessary.

Information Exchange Is Centre's Objective

The establishment of the Metropolitan Information Centre of Continuing Education is based on the findings of Project Information Exchange. It will function as a fact-finding, information sharing, training and demonstration facility for students, and as an aid to course sponsors and professionals, and will provide information tools and products to promote and facilitate adult education.

The purpose of the Centre is to operate a working model of an information Exchange in continuing education in Metropolitan Toronto in order to demonstrate the benefits of systematic information storage, dissemination and diffusion to the adult education community. Such a centre can aid materially the processes of developing an adult education policy by revealing duplication of effort as well as gaps in provision, and generally expedite the joint planning of continuing education opportunities.

Specific objectives are: to produce a revised and improved Continuing Education Directory; to use the machine-readable file already created as a basis for up-dating; to test and evaluate other effective means of providing information to selected public and professional users; and to develop packaging and communication methods designed to reach the functionally illiterate, the disadvantaged or other public not as yet involved in adult education. Included in the objectives is the demonstrated need for a program of publicity and orientation which will encourage full and appropriate use of information tools

developed by the Centre, and also provide continuing feedback on their effectiveness.

In order to extend the range of information services to the citizen, the feasibility of integrating the Centre's information systems and services with other data banks in existence or under development across the province is to be explored. Complete descriptions of the Centre's computer-based file management system will be compiled for use in other Ontario communities. A series of reports of summary data derived from the Centre's files will facilitate the co-operative program planning and research activities of adult educators in Metropolitan Toronto.

With these objectives, a working model centre can be developed to form the basis for a series of information centres, possibly interconnected, throughout the province.

Information Centre To Benefit Adult Education Community

In 1970, the Centre will meet its objectives by producing a number of directories or listings of courses in a variety of forms to meet a number of distinct needs among the various publics. Effective distribution plans, and promotional, educational, and continuing evaluation for improvement of these information packages will be carried out. A publicity program to reach those groups in the community as yet unable to take advantage of continuing education will be undertaken.

Expected benefits from the Centre are as follows:

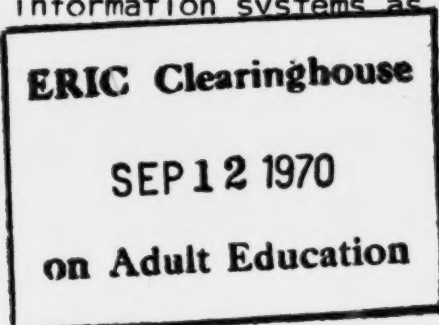
1. The general public will be provided with easier and more efficient access to impartial information about courses of interest to them.
2. Professional users, such as librarians and counsellors, will be able to give more comprehensive and up-to-date information to their clients.
3. For the first time, the variety and extent of adult education provision will be studied and analysed for co-operative planning and evaluation.
4. Adult education administrators and researchers will have access to evaluation information regarding numbers of courses in particular subject areas, range of opportunities in particular geographic areas, fee structures, number of teaching hours, gaps in course provision, correlation between types of courses and types of sponsoring agencies, and so forth.
5. Data essential to the management and policy formation functions of educational agencies and government will be available in easily accessible form.
6. Co-operative program planning among Metro adult education agencies will be aided by the distribution of summary data of course provision in the city.

7. Agencies' desire for common data collecting and reporting formats (for statistical analyses, research studies, and report submissions to provincial and federal government departments) will be strengthened.
8. An important outcome will be the operation of a working model or demonstration information centre whereby other communities and agencies can see educational information management and utilization in action.

Operations And Development Of Centre

The Centre is situated in the Central Library building, 214 College Street, a central location within the community. Operation in its first year will be under an executive committee and a small, independent advisory board composed of representatives of adult education agencies and of the citizens of Metropolitan Toronto.

Establishment of policy and implementation will be based on findings of previous study, the Centre's objectives, continuing user research and the advice of the advisory board. The Centre will initially operate independently, but it is prepared to consider any means of integrating its services with appropriate agencies or information systems as they are developed.



February 24, 1970